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Steven Universe: Art & Origins



Synopsis

Steven Universe: Art & Origins is the first book to take fans behind the scenes of the groundbreaking and boundlessly creative Cartoon Network animated series Steven Universe. The eponymous Steven is a boy who, alongside his mentors, the Crystal Gems (Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl) must learn to use his inherited powers to protect his home, Beach City, from the forces of evil. Bursting with concept art, production samples, early sketches, storyboards, and exclusive commentary, this lavishly illustrated companion book offers a meticulous written and visual history of the show, as well as an all-access tour of the creative team's process. Steven Universe: Art & Origins reveals how creator Rebecca Sugar, the writers, the animators, and the voice actors work in tandem to bring this adventure-packed television series to life.

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Customer Reviews

Chris McDonnell has designed books on Ralph Bakshi, Bill Plympton, the Joker, Wonder Woman, and many more. He is a contributor to the Cartoon Brew animation blog. He creates animation for television programs that have included Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job! (Adult Swim), Portlandia (IFC), Comedy Bang! Bang! (IFC), and Yo Gabba Gabba! (Nickelodeon). McDonnell is also the author and designer of Adventure Time: The Art of Ooo. He lives in Philadelphia.

Steven Universe: Art and Origins is not just an art book--it's also a collection of early material, a reveal of many initial concepts, and an amazing experience to sort through. In my review I'll give

you a description of the structure and overview, while also collecting notable information for fans. Obviously just about everything is "notable" with a book of this magnitude, so this may get long, but I'll try to include anecdotes that have some unique insight or perspective on the main source material--with as little of "OMG this was the original idea for this!" as possible.

The overview: After a foreword from Rebecca Sugar and an introduction from Genndy Tartakovsky, we get Part 1: Origins. This contains some narratives about Rebecca Sugar's early life as an artist--inspiration, family, college projects--all illustrated, of course, with childhood photos and early art. Rebecca mentions having wanted to bury her femininity for a while, but coming back to draw female forms and include dancing after she learned to sort through her issues using art. Her college education and connections with other artists are discussed--some in interview format, some in narrative--and there is some background regarding her time on Adventure Time. The story moves on to talking about developing the pilot and what went into her character and plot ideas. Character design is discussed in depth, with Rebecca giving initial sketches to a design team and developing the characters' initial pilot look. Some really slick promo art is shared--posters, sketches, great concepts that were designed to bring in new viewers and make them curious about the show. The pilot succeeded in getting the green light to develop it into a TV series.

Part 2 discusses the show's Green Light and Development. Rebecca and some of the other crew, in interview format, talk about getting the team together and allowing for both nailed-down character essentials and flexibility for the writers to explore and collaborate. Developing the setting was also a big part of the to-do list; coming up with Beach City itself, its businesses, its residents, and also the creatures the Gems would fight. Some cute stories are shared about the early Crewniverse hanging out at a cabin and talking about the show all the time, hashing it out. There are some great, loose character model sheets for early versions of Greg, Connie, Sadie and Lars, and the four main characters.

Part 3 is about Character Design. They discuss how the pilot got released and fans grew attached to what they initially looked like, only to be "outraged" by the changes, making tons of assumptions about who was controlling the process. Rebecca shares some thoughts on her development process and her philosophy on letting different artists draw the characters differently while gripping onto specifics she set. Main, palette, and distance models are discussed, with some technical details of what different artists do on the team and how they handle props or special poses. There are many sheets of how to draw the Gems on model (with pointers on what NOT to do), and then there are some Homeworld Gem ideas that didn't get used, and finally, some sketches and concept art for Lapis Lazuli, Peridot, Jasper, and Bismuth.

Part 4 is on Writing and Storyboarding. More Crewniverse interviews provide insight into the process, including how much is revised from the early days and how collaborative

everything is. Some specific episodes, like "Ocean Gem," "Monster Buddies," and "Island Adventure" are put into perspective with how they were written by the group. There's heavy discussion of how the process works and why processes that work on other shows wouldn't work here, and what "rules" are firm and what's just a suggestion, and what's changed as the show's plot became more complex and important. Steven still having access to the "side" stories, the ones that involve Beach City humans and non-world-shaking stakes, is still very important to the story that the original Crew wants to tell. Cute images from the Crew's thumbnail storyboards, Gem designing, and technology designing workshops are shared too. There's some good continued discussion of concepts in Part 4, especially about fusion and relationships and the larger message the show is sending. How do you tell a story and why? There are many answers to that, and sometimes it's about fun and sometimes it's about a message and sometimes it's about wanting to make an episode about something you've never seen a cartoon do before--something specific to you that other people can suddenly see represented. One of my favorite parts of it is when they discuss Steven discovering the Gems' weaknesses over time and having that NOT make him think less of them--more like he admires them for being strong enough to shoulder the burdens he didn't know they were carrying before. Storyboarder Lamar Abrams talks about the importance of growing up not just being about becoming bitter, and I really like that. Part 5 is on Sound and Vision. There's some history of how they found the voice actors for the major roles, and some of the actors give perspectives on their relationship and experience on the show. Aivi and Surasshu, as the composers, discuss their process as well, with some anecdotes and discussions of why musical palettes work better for characters instead of assigning them themes. Places and objects have their own sounds too. Part 6 covers Background Design and Painting. Steven Sugar takes the stage and explains general background thoughts as well as specifics for certain settings. His focus on detail is really fascinating to read about--it's really him who nails down the locations in Beach City and where an outlet is in a house on the wall. The directors and other Crewniverse folks discuss the use of color and background items in the show, and how they use it to create mood or feel changeable enough to be real. Part 7 discusses Animation and Post, with a spotlight on the work they do in Korea at animation studios Sunmin and Rough Draft. The process is described--how and when the material is transformed from animatics to animated cartoons. Nick DeMayo discusses timing and adding the sound effects and whatnot. There's also some design instruction that's provided to the animators in Korea. Some special highlighted drawings and pieces, like the "C.L.O.D.S." zine or some keys for Ruby and Sapphire, are included. Even the bumpers and end tag animations are discussed here. And of course they had to mention a couple very special episodes, such as when

Takafumi Hori from Studio Trigger came in to do "Mindful Education," or when they did the musical episode, "Mr. Greg." And Part 8 is called "Onward." The intention of the section is unclear at first based on the title of the chapter, but you can quickly see they're discussing the forward-thinking message the show has--how its representation of its creators' experiences has also struck a chord with people who wanted and NEEDED its diversity. Lauren Zuke says a very wise thing when she states that she wants the show to provide "insight . . . not a solution." That's one thing this show does well; it spotlights problems and situations and feelings, but only shows you how those things can be dealt with, not necessarily how they SHOULD, in all cases, be dealt with. Representation matters, and seeing evidence that you are a part of this world when you're from a marginalized or underrepresented group is valuable in a way that you can only know if you DON'T have it. The show's writers also weigh in on good vs. evil and how it's too black and white; that we needed a show with nuance, and has a message of love and tolerance. Kat Morris acknowledges that there are more important things than making a feelsy and entertaining piece of media, but as she says, the point is to let people see themselves in something and be challenged. And the creators are able to see at conventions and online that people are responding emotionally, viscerally, to their work. It puts a lot of pressure on an artist to do it right, but in the words of Dogcopter, "Just be true to yourself and people will appreciate your honesty." The book closes with some photos of the Crew and a few more pages of art. And it kinda leaves you with a squishy feeling. :D

Notable:1. I was relieved to see Rebecca state it plainly in the foreword: the items you see from the development phases of this show are not to be taken as canon or as "real" insights into how you should interpret it now. She specifically mentioned that she does not consider the Gems "girls" or "goddesses," and that was particularly important to me. Throughout, you're supposed to see the contributed bits and in-development pieces in the context of what they were: early drafts, embryonic. We all become different from what we were even though we grew from it and may have roots in it still, but that doesn't mean you can point at the seed and say its flower is meant to be understood surrounded by dirt.2. The original designs for the Gems fluctuated a lot, and in a couple cases even names flopped around. An early name for Garnet was "Onyx," and if you've seen the pilot, you know Pearl got her signature nose later and Garnet's hair took a while to become the splendid square afro. Amethyst seems to have changed the least. Themes were given to them initially (like Amethyst being "flora and fauna," which you can sort of see in her pilot intro with her lying on big cats). You can still see some of the original intentions in how the ideas manifested, but the first ideas do not gel particularly well with what the show became. This is particularly interesting because non-creatives commonly think creative people simply receive inspiration and birth their creations into the world wholesale.

Inspiration exists, but it's much more common to take an inspired idea and REALLY WORK ON IT. This book's origins section does a great job showing how that works.³ Some early sketched-out ideas for episodes seem very far from what would fit into the show now (such as an idea for an episode where Pearl is obsessed with the pizza guy??), but one seems to be the roots of "Bubble Buddies," which implies that Steven's original crush was "Priyanka" instead of Connie. (That's now Connie's mother's name.)⁴ The pilot's title was "The Time Thing."⁵ Initial notes for Garnet say she should have the coolest shoes of the three, that she's commanding and outer-spacey and also weird, and that she's inspired by Grace Jones, boy Michael Jackson, and Estelle in "I Can Be a Freak." Initial notes for Amethyst insist on the "fanny pack" pouch and suggest her clothes are cut, her hair is in chunks, and she should have an animal theme with a wild texture. Initial notes for Pearl indicate a desire to have her opposite Amethyst in her formal way of dressing and needing to have an outfit that would allow her to be hung upside down, possibly with a pearl stone theme for baubles in her hair. (Rebecca indicated she needed the most help with Pearl.)⁶ Early versions of the show included the idea that the Gems might be trying to hide being Gems in public, and that they kept magic away from Steven for the most part instead of encouraging him to use it. A "lost" episode about Steven summoning his shield (later incorporated into the episode "Gem Glow") had him saving Greg with it and dreaming about his mother, and having Pearl drive a crappy old car (later incorporated into "Last One Out of Beach City"). Rebecca and Ian reveal that the dream Steven had in it was used a little in "Rose's Room," and that a song called "The Meatball Sub Song" was involved which could have contributed to the show getting picked up despite that we never got to hear it. (Imagine that, Steven singing about food!)⁷ There's a note in the early character design section that says "the girls can all turn into Steven" with an accompanying illustration of Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl shapeshifted as him. Cute, because we actually got to see them do this in the episode "Keep Beach City Weird" with the exception of Pearl, though there's no reason she shouldn't be able to do it--she just doesn't.⁸ Rebecca Sugar shares an anecdote about thinking there was a "best" way to draw that was objectively correct (influenced by some art-school stuff), and through that she arrived at the idea that Pearl was a cone, Amethyst was a sphere, and Garnet was a cube, because all of those things say something about who they are (pointedness, fluidness, stability). She evolved from that idea to a more flexible idea of how drawing works for different artists, but that was part of what helped her nail the characters down. Steven, eventually, was fixed to having a heart-shaped face.⁹ The Tiger Millionaire and Purple Puma flyer shown in the episode "Tiger Millionaire," presented as something Steven drew, was actually drawn by Lily DeMayo (daughter of Nick DeMayo, animation director) when she was seven.¹⁰ Guides are made for the

Crew to use featuring reminders on drawing the characters. It's kind of adorable to see common drawing errors or misconceptions or inconsistent details discussed in a how-to format for the people who actually work there.¹¹ A timeline exists for the show and it encompasses TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS of Gem and human history. It was too spoilery to be in the book, but there is a LOT of lore that is laid down, and this tool mentioned in Part 4 established that this document is referenced often to make events make sense in the timeline.¹² It's been established before, but Amethyst's origin in Earth's Prime Kindergarten was not initially known as part of her character when she was invented, and that was discussed in Part 4 of this book--how the writing retreats the Crew takes to discuss the story sometimes result in huge revelations like this. "Oh, that makes sense, that's why we wrote her like that" is one of those things I recognize as a writer--you know a character has a certain vibe, but you don't know what explains it. You just trust that something does. And eventually, sometimes you find out what it is and it all makes sense. Interesting to know they did this with Amethyst.¹³ "Lars and Sadie make out even though they're not together" was the basic idea for making "Island Adventure." And the original idea for "Onion Friend" had a "Grandma Shallot" character. The writers sometimes play writing games to brainstorm, and those were shared. Some ideas for a story which was later used in "Future Boy Zoltron," covering Mr. Smiley's romance/comedy partnership with an old flame, were shared with more emphasis on the characters being lovers. Garnet's part in the story was more explicit too, with her giving people future predictions that are not at all nice or gently delivered, and they have to shut down the business in the wake of Garnet's badassery. Weird. Other ideas were used but not as they're presented, like one where Greg learns about fusion from the Gems (but witnessed the fusion of Pearl and Amethyst, not Pearl and Rose), and a complicated one where cross-Gem fusion is a new idea in a flashback and Rose wants Garnet to fuse with her to teach her about it but she's too unsure of her own fusion relationship as such to risk it. The idea was that Pearl would be jealous and Pearl, Rose, and Garnet would actually fuse in the episode. This has not been done in the show.¹⁴ Rebecca Sugar apparently just pops up with concepts she wants the writers to work in. Like "I want Steven to be in a mushroom forest" (which hasn't happened yet) or "I want Steven to have cats on his fingers" (which, obviously, happened early on). Rebecca gets little concepts that are sort of dreamlike, and they figure out which episode they can put them in. Working those things in sometimes seems like as much of a priority as getting plot elements in!¹⁵ I like that they dish a bit about the fan reaction to Garnet's Fusion status. They thought they were being a little too obvious to not get caught, but Ian said the fans figured it out and then got bored of the idea and decided it must be even more complicated than that. People were apparently worried that Garnet would be replaced by her

component Gems in the story if she were to unfuse, but obviously since Ruby and Sapphire want to be together, that doesn't happen.¹⁶ Kat Morris's "rules" as discussed in Part 4 are "Garnet never asks questions" and "the story has to stay in Steven's perspective." I love how strict they are about Garnet not asking questions (except in the episode "The Answer," though there have been a couple ~technical~ questions from her; she usually just finds a way to ask a question with a statement, like "tell me what you saw").¹⁷ A great quote from Lauren Zuke on the incidentally queer content of the Gems' relationships and gender: "Personally, I'm happy to not have to think, 'I'm writing a character based on my queer experiences.' That would be so hard! I'm just writing from my perspective, and I happen to be queer. I think that's what makes the show feel natural when it comes to that. It's a fine line between defining something so that people are aware it exists, which is so important, but also letting it breathe, so it's not forever contained in a box labeled 'queer media.'"¹⁸ In Part 5, Michaela Dietz relates her experiences as an adoptee to relate to what Amethyst deals with as an "adoptee" into the Crystal Gem family without knowing where she really came from or what it means to be a part of that. She's said this before in some other interviews and panels, so it's not new in general, but it's probably new in print. Deedee Magno Hall, who plays Pearl, obviously relates to Pearl's maternal nature.¹⁹ Tom Scharpling and Charlyne Yi were voice actors that Rebecca specifically had in mind for her characters (Greg and Ruby respectively). Rebecca's illustrated letter to Charlyne explaining Ruby and Sapphire's relationship and Ruby's role on the show is really adorable.²⁰ Music nerds like me will very much appreciate the photographed notes on music motifs--the Diamonds each have a solfège syllable and a chord (White is F#M7/Sol, Yellow is BM7/Fa, Blue is EM7/Fa, and Pink is AM7/Mi), and Steven's powers and modes are coded with instruments and styles.²¹ Some world maps provide new possible insights. Greenland in our world is Blueland in theirs. South America is called Pangea. Aqua Mexico is labeled about where Mexico is in our world. India is the Indian Islands. There's an Australia and a New Australia. A big sea in the middle of Asia is called the Tunguska Sea. Rose's Fountain is in Spain or Portugal; the Sky Spire and Strawberry Battlefield are in Norway; the Shooting Star Shrine is in the middle of the drastically different Asian continent; the Galaxy Warp is in the Tunguska Sea; the Lunar Sea Spire is off the coast of Canada; Mask Island is in the Atlantic near Beach City; the Comm Relay is in the Western United States.²² It was known from interviews that Shelby Rabara (voice of Peridot) is a dancer and provided the foot sounds and coaching to create the short tap number in the episode "Mr. Greg." But what's great is here, there's a visual reference included! Photos of Shelby doing the dance are lined up next to the drawings of Pearl and Steven in the "Mr. Greg" number doing the steps! She poses in dance moves with her husband for the Greg/Pearl dance for "Both of You" too.²³ There's a really cute story in the

last section about Amber Cragg ascending from fan to Crewniverse member through posting Pearl art in response to the pilot and eventually getting contacted to take a board test. That is the kind of thing so many online artists dream of!

My book arrived today and I'm so in love with it. Rebecca Sugar has a way with making her audience fall in love with every single one of her characters!! The hardcover book is also a steal at this price because it can last a very long time!

This book was a present for a friend who LOVES Steven Universe. He loves this book as well, not only for its Steven Universe trivia and insider info, but also for the great information it provides on how an animated show is created.

This book has much more behind-the-scenes artwork than what the show's creators have posted online. The text is mostly quotes from interviews with the crew, with heavy input from creator Rebecca Sugar. It does not focus on the plotlines of the show and has no spoilers beyond the episodes that have aired. The book is a beautiful object. I was surprised at how lengthy it was when I first received it. This space is used to showcase the artwork. The early character designs were my favorite part.

It's a beautiful book full of insight on how Steven Universe became what we know and love. I teared up just reading the foreword. Definitely a must buy for Steven Universe fans.

The book itself is a treasure trove of drawings and origin stories about Steven Universe. That being said, I was extremely dissatisfied with the state of the book once it arrived. It was advertised as new, but the cover has a deep scratch all along it and the top corner of the binding along the spine is bent and worn. The pages are wavy, as if the book had gotten wet at some point and been dried. Will never purchase from this supplier ever again. False advertising.

A very interesting and detailed book describing the process of creating the show along with beautifully designed concept sketches, and interview input. It was a very enjoyable book that delved into the show behind the scenes. The book arrived in a timely manner as promised, if not sooner. I really recommend getting this if you love Steven Universe and everything about the lovable characters of the show.

This book was perfect and those of you fanatics the art is great there are so many pages to look through and a really great read itself about all the insights of the show and just overall beautiful

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